

I. Introduction

In this paper I want to take you on a walk through a garden. It is, to be sure, an imaginary garden; nevertheless, it bears a significance which extends beyond itself. Some of this significance concerns words and texts: for as we shall see, the garden is, amongst other things, a 'garden of rhetoric'.¹ The garden in question appears in the Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. These *Homilies* are of course very well-known and equally well-studied: Gregory embarks on an exegesis of the Septuagint Greek text of the Song using a form of allegorical exegesis which is influenced by Origen of Alexandria's exegesis of the Song and which Gregory defends at some length in his Preface to his own *Homilies*.² For obvious reasons, Gregory's *Homilies* have mostly been studied from the perspective of his doctrine of the soul's ascent to God, his apophatic theology and his biblical hermeneutics. I do not propose to go over that literature. Here, instead of pressing ahead to the spiritual interpretation, I would like us to pause and wander through the landscape and garden which is described vividly by the Song, but even more lavishly by Gregory of Nyssa himself in *Cant V* (GNO VI 145,14 – 147,5; tr. Norris, 159).

Why is this important? The passage on which this paper will focus is of the kind usually ignored by modern scholars: first, because it relates to the 'literal' narrative of the Song (and is consequently by-passed *en route* to studies of the Song's spiritual meaning); secondly, because it is an example of Gregory's use of rhetoric, which is still often regarded as peripheral to his theology. Studies of Gregory's rhetoric have moved beyond the kind of scholarship which once analysed it – usually dismissively – purely in terms of the 'Second Sophistic'.³ Nevertheless, I suggest that traces of this habit remain in the tendency to side-line such passages as 'mere rhetoric' with no theological import.

¹ I borrow the phrase from the title of Øivind Andersen, *Im Garten der Rhetorik: die Kunst der Rede in der Antike*, Darmstadt, 2001.

² Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum Canticorum*, ed. by H. Langerbeck, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, VI, Leiden, 1986, 3-13. English translation (unless otherwise noted) Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. by Richard A Norris, Atlanta, GA, 2012.

³ See e.g. Louis Méridier, *L'Influence de la seconde sophistique sur l'oeuvre de Grégoire de Nysse*, Paris, 1906, 20, 47, 280. Méridier separates the content of Gregory's writing from its form which, he alleges, bears the mark of 'la technique des sophistes' (97); the combination is 'un produit bizarre et déformé', a 'union mal assortie', producing 'dissonances choquantes' (280). Cf Aubineau's comments in Gregory of Nyssa, *Traité de La Virginité*, trans. by Michel Aubineau, Paris, 1971: Gregory is enslaved to the rules of rhetoric (89-94) while being a 'great artist' who can 'seduce' his reader (91 and 93). A more subtle approach can be found in Matthieu Cassin, *L'écriture de la controverse chez Grégoire de Nysse: polémique littéraire et exégèse dans le Contre Eunome*, Paris; Turnhout, 2012.

Gregory's description of a pleasant landscape or garden⁴ in *Cant V* is an instance of the rhetoric technique of *ekphrasis*. Early scholarship on Gregory's rhetoric, noting his fondness for *ekphrasis* explained it as the creation of a miniature work of art that would appeal to a classically-educated audience, but criticised it for producing 'un pur morceau de bravoure' lacking connection to its theological context.⁵ More recent assessments of *ekphrasis*, however, have stressed its importance within a literary work as a whole and have articulated its effect on the audience in terms of emotional engagement: the audience should be persuaded by *ekphrasis*, not just mesmerized by its author's skill. Thus Ruth Webb argues that the defining quality of *ekphrasis* is *enargeia* or 'the vividness that makes absent things seem present by its appeal to the imagination'.⁶ *Ekphrasis* had the effect of involving the audience emotionally, by stimulating their imaginative empathy with the observers of the scene in the narrative.

ekphrasis and *enargeia* underline the emotive and communicative aspects of rhetorical discourse and the way in which it involves the action of one mind upon another. In particular, these rhetorical uses of *ekphrasis* demanded an active engagement from the listener who was prompted by the speaker's words to supply details.⁷

I will seek to understand how the *ekphrasis* in *Cant V* was intended to have emotional and persuasive – and thus *theological* – effect. In order to do this, I will ask how descriptions of pleasant landscapes functioned in classical literature (**part II**) and elsewhere in Gregory's writing (**part III**). My argument is that Gregory anticipated that his readers would supply precisely such well-known descriptions as 'details' in response to his very carefully-worded prompts. Furthermore, an understanding of such literature helps us to understand what kind of emotional reaction Gregory might hope that the audience would share with the observer of the scene in the narrative of the Song – that is, the bride (**part IV**). Finally, in my conclusions, I will draw together my reflections on the audience's active engagement with Gregory's text, on Christology and on early Christian responses to Greek literary styles.

II. Landscapes and gardens in the ancient imagination: mood, character and rhetoric.

Gardens tell us something about their creators. Gardening, argues one garden historian, 'has little to do with the history of art or the development of aesthetic theories... It is all about social

⁴ The two merge, for reasons which will be clarified below, page 4.

⁵ Méridier, *L'Influence de la seconde sophistique*, 139–140, 143–144; quote from 141, repeated 143 in relation to a passage from *Cant V* (GNO VI 151,12 - 152,7; tr. Norris 165).

⁶ Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT, 2009, 193.

⁷ Webb, *Ekphrasis*, 193.

aspirations, lifestyles, money and class'.⁸ We can, therefore, 'read' a garden like a text – as the anthropologist Kate Fox has done so amusingly in her book *Watching the English*. 'The English all want to live in their own private box with their own private green bit... Our moats and drawbridges may be imaginary, but every Englishman's castle has its miniature "grounds"'.⁹ But precisely because gardens can be *read* in this way, what is *said* and *written* about them takes on significance: these words reveal not only something about the values, aspirations and emotions of the gardener but also of the observer. Thus, according to Fox, a lower-class garden might well be treasured by its owner for being 'colourful', 'cheerful' and 'neat' and 'tidy', but condemned by others for being 'garish' and 'regimented'.¹⁰

As Richard Jenkyns points out so eloquently in his book *Virgil's Experience*, the ancients' attitude to landscape revealed much about *their* social values:

Whereas the landscape garden, which most Englishmen and even some others believe to be the highest form of garden art yet devised, affects to mimic the spontaneity and asymmetry of uncultivated nature, the ancient garden tames and regularizes it. Typically, it is symmetrical and enclosed and it is useful for growing fruits and vegetables.¹¹

Gardens therefore represent nature tamed – and even when classical authors write about a pleasant landscape it still has many garden-like features: in Jenkyns' words, the authors describe 'mild and gentle scenes: cultivated ground, tilth and vineyard; or a mixture of spring, meadow and shady grove'.¹² Conversely, a hostile landscape is full of high mountains, snow-capped peaks and torrents hurling themselves towards the sea. As Jenkyns argues, ancient depictions of ideal landscape emerge from a social reality in which agriculture was precarious, life in the countryside was threatened by dangers from weather, beasts and bandits – and life in cities was increasingly crowded.

The ancients, then, shared an assumption that a pleasant landscape was fertile, tended and moderately populated – and ancient writers drew on this shared assumption in various ways. Firstly, they use landscape **to evoke mood**. Descriptions of wild mountains evoke a sense of fear or awe, because only a god can dwell there.¹³ Descriptions of milder landscapes, however, evoke pleasure and a pride in civilisation and the value of hard work; in love-lyric they evoke the awakening or satisfaction of desire. Pleasant landscapes are above all *attractive*: they draw to them both humans

⁸ Charles Quest-Ritson, *The English Garden: A Social History* (London, 2001), cited in Kate Fox, *Watching the English* (London, 2004), 130.

⁹ Fox, *Watching the English*, 124–125.

¹⁰ Fox, *Watching the English*, 131–132.

¹¹ Richard Jenkyns, *Virgil's Experience: Nature and History: Times, Names and Places*, Oxford, 1998, 23.

¹² Jenkyns, *Virgil's Experience*, 23.

¹³ See for example, *Homeric Hymn 19 – To Pan*, 6-14 in M. L. West, tran., *Homeric hymns, Homeric apocrypha, lives of Homer*, Cambridge, Mass., 2003, 198–9.

and gods. Thus, for example, the *Homeric Hymns* recount how Persephone was lured to the entrance of Hades while she was 'picking flowers across the soft meadow, roses and saffron and lovely violets, iris and hyacinth, and narcissus; even Pan is 'drawn to the gentle streams' and at night is attracted back to 'a dark spring' and 'a soft meadow where crocus and fragrant hyacinth spring up inextricably mingled with the grass'.¹⁴ Indeed, Sappho uses precisely this idea of attractive landscape to call Aphrodite to her:

Come goddess, to your holy shrine,
where your delightful apple grove
awaits, and altars smoke with frankincense.

A cool brook sounds through apple boughs,
and all's with roses overhung;
from shimmering leaves a trancelike sleep takes hold.

Here's a flowery meadow, too,
where horses graze, and gentle blow the breezes...

Here, then, Love-goddess much in mind,
infuse our feast in gracious style
with nectar poured in cups that turn to gold.¹⁵

Richard Jenkyns comments on the way in which one finds in this poem, perhaps for the first time in Greek literature, 'the sentiment of place; that is, the combination of personal emotion or experience with the description or evocation of the individual character of a scene. This poem conveys both a mood and a picture, both subjectivity and objectivity, as Sappho conveys how she feels, being in a particular place at a particular time'.¹⁶ The poem expresses 'an enhanced feeling for nature coming into association with the divine'.¹⁷ Sappho's mood of joyful expectation is appropriate because when a god enters a landscape she or he *transforms* it: in the *Iliad*, for example, the sea rejoices when Poseidon drives in his chariot over the waves; the earth blossoms with extravagant and out of season flowers under the coupling of Zeus and Hera.¹⁸ But, crucially, *in the context of the poems*, the natural phenomena are real. They are not metaphors or similes external to the narrative: rather, the landscape and its flowers are integral parts of the narrative, albeit parts described in a particular way

¹⁴ See *Homeric Hymn 2 – To Demeter*: lines 6-8, tr. West, 32–33. *Homeric Hymn 19 – To Pan*: lines 9, 20, 25-6, tr. West, 198–201.

¹⁵ M. L. West, tran., *Greek Lyric Poetry: The Poems and Fragments of the Greek Iambic, Elegiac, and Melic Poets*, Oxford, 1993, 36–37.

¹⁶ Jenkyns, *Virgil's Experience*, 34.

¹⁷ Jenkyns, *Virgil's Experience*, 35.

¹⁸ *Iliad* 13:26-9, trans. by A. T Murray and William F Wyatt, Cambridge, Mass., 1999. See Jenkyns, *Virgil's Experience*, 27, 55.

to heighten a specific mood. In Sappho's poem, 'Aphrodite exists and the grove exists, as in the fourteenth book of the Iliad Zeus and Hera and the flowers exist'.¹⁹

Secondly, classical poets used descriptions of landscape **to heighten or emphasise a sense of someone's character**. For example, Alcinous' garden which is beautifully described in *Odyssey* VII is orderly, enclosed, and extraordinarily fruitful, with pears, pomegranates, apples and figs, olives and vines. It thus fits and heightens our sense of who Alcinous is: 'the rich king of an orderly society'.²⁰ Even though the fertility of his garden is magical, it is so because of the gods' favour.²¹ Significantly, of the two springs in Alcinous' garden one provides irrigation for the whole garden, the other water for the local settlement. These springs remind us of Alcinous' responsibility both for his own family and for the wider community – but they are not *mere* symbols. In the context of the poem they are real rivers. Jenkyns argues that the places where Circe, Calypso and Nausicaa live all have a similar kind of significance in the *Odyssey*: their locations are not allegories of character; rather, the fact that Nausicaa lives in a gentle meadow landscape and Calypso in a remote, wild yet fertile island says something about the women they are.²² There is a strong sense of fit between character and context.

This was taken further in Roman Republican and early Augustan literature in which farming (albeit of a fairly gentle kind), was deemed an appropriate activity for the wise man²³ and a garden was the location for philosophical debate, as opposed to the idle chatter of city dinner-parties.²⁴ Conversely, one finds condemnation of excessive gardens which were intended for display rather than the production of food or philosophical contemplation. Horace, for example, condemns vast estates with huge fish-ponds and gardens given over to ornamental trees and perfumed flowers, replacing land previously sustaining wheat, olive trees or oak.²⁵ In such writing, then, landscapes, especially farms or gardens, are endowed with a moral significance which reflects back on their owners. Indeed, so effective was this association of an ordered and productive garden with Roman Republican rectitude, that it became part of the modern narrative about the rise and decline of Rome.

Just as a garden mirrors the character of its owner, so the gardens of a nation reflect the character and the degree of advancement of the State. It is no coincidence that

¹⁹ Jenkyns, *Virgil's Experience*, 36.

²⁰ Jenkyns, *Virgil's Experience*, 27.

²¹ *Odyssey* VII 132 'such were the glorious gifts of the gods at the dwelling of Alcinous': Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. by A. T. Murray and Jeffrey Henderson, Cambridge, MA, 2002.

²² *Virgil's Experience*, 29–30.

²³ The classic example is Cicero, *De senectate* 15–17 [51–60], as noted by Penella in *The Private Orations of Themistius*, trans. by Robert J. Penella, Berkeley, 2000, 56 (n.11).

²⁴ Horace, *Satires* II 6, 70–76: which prompts the famous story of the town and the country mouse.

²⁵ Horace, *Odes* II 15: *The Odes and Epodes*, trans. by Bennett, Charles Edwin, Cambridge, Mass; London, 1988, 146–147.

the popular garden of the Roman Republic was the simple kitchen garden, while under the Empire pretentious landscape gardens were the vogue. The vitalizing energy of the Republic found an outlet in the productive vegetable plot: the elaborate but sterile gardens of the Empire were symbolic of incipient decay.²⁶

Thirdly, the increasingly elaborate descriptions of tended landscapes led writers to use such descriptions as **a space in which to ponder the art of writing itself**. The reason for this is obvious: the composition of texts, like gardening, is a combination of nature and nurture. Too much artifice and the effect will seem ostentatious or plain ugly; too little and it will be wild, disorganised and unfruitful. An excellent example of this rhetorical theme appears in Themistius' funeral oration in honour of his father.²⁷ To begin with, agriculture appears in this oration merely as a suitable activity for a philosopher: 'my father praised agriculture highly and loved it. He declared that in agriculture one could find the only kind of rest that is suitable for a philosopher – the kind that comes after hard work'.²⁸ Next Themistius artfully uses a reference to the Odyssey to comment on the perfect fit between his father's 'cultivated and fruitful garden' and 'his soul which was well-ordered and not full of rustic crudeness (ἀγροικίας)'.²⁹ Finally, he draws a connection between gardening and rhetoric:

Nor could you have made any comparison of even a brief remark or admonition of his to the fruit that grew without interruption for Alcinous or to the golden apples of the Hesperides; for my father's intention was not to achieve beauty alone in his words. He said that those who, in working the soil, plant only groves of lush plane trees and cypresses and have no interest in wheat and grapevines aim more at enjoyment than at nourishment. He used to compare such tree-planters to those who, in their discourse, are in search only of pleasure and of how to charm their audience, but neither know how, nor even try, to speak of the things from which the soul derives nourishment and by which it is bettered. Such men, he would say, are not yet philosophers any more than those tree-planters are farmers. They are flatterers, fawners and cooks, instead of physicians; they are beautifiers instead of athletic trainers.³⁰

This is highly artful writing: Themistius begins with a reference to Homer and concludes with Plato's famous contrast between the sophist and the philosopher in *Gorgias*.³¹ This is a theme of which he

²⁶ James Lawson, 'The Roman Garden', *Greece and Rome*, 19/57 (1950), 97.

²⁷ Oration 20, tr. Penella, 51–60; page numbers of the Petavius-Harduinus edition in square brackets.

²⁸ Or. 20 [236], tr. Penella, 55.

²⁹ Or. 20 [237], tr. Penella, 56.

³⁰ Or. 20 [237], tr. Penella, 56–57.

³¹ Plato, *Gorgias* 462b–66a.

was particularly fond: philosophy and rhetoric need each other, for philosophy with rhetoric is mute, while rhetoric without philosophy has nothing worth-while to say.³² The well-ordered, carefully-irrigated and fecund garden is thus doubly-appropriate to Themistius' father: like Alcinous' garden it fits his inner *character* (his soul), but in addition to this it also reflects the way in which that character was habitually *expressed* – that is, through his words. This passage also reveals that for all his love of order and culture, Themistius' father had a strong sense that you could have too much artifice in a garden. In his case – as we saw with Horace – excessive artifice was connected with a failure to be productive: 'lush plane trees and cypresses' as opposed to 'wheat and grapevines'.³³

Finally, the description of a pleasant landscape was connected with the art of words in a slightly different way through the influence of Plato's *Phaedrus*. This dialogue takes place as Socrates and Phaedrus walk outside (but not far from) the city walls along the Ilissus, which 'looks pretty and pure and clear and fit for girls to play by' (indeed, Phaedrus suggests they paddle in it as they walk). They seek a place, under a tall plane tree, where there is 'shade... a moderate breeze and grass to sit... or to lie down on' in the heat of the day.³⁴ When they get there, Socrates surprises his companion with an *ekphrasis* in praise of the spot:

By Hera, it is a charming resting place. For this plane tree is very spreading and lofty, and the tall and shady willow is very beautiful, and it is in full bloom, so as to make the place most fragrant; then, too, the spring is very pretty as it flows under the plane tree, and its water is very cool, to judge by my foot. And it seems to be a sacred place of some nymphs and of Achelous, judging by the figurines and statues. Then again, if you please, how lovely and perfectly charming the breeziness of the place is! and it resounds with the shrill summer music of the chorus of cicadas. But the most delightful thing of all is the grass, as it grows on the gentle slope, thick enough to be just right when you lay your head on it.³⁵

It is in this place that the two men discuss love and rhetoric; it is in this dialogue that, even as he critiques existing rhetoric, Socrates seems to make space for a 'truly rhetorical and persuasive art'.³⁶ Indeed, he seems to exemplify both kinds himself, in his first (bad) and his second (good) speech about love. Notably one of the things which distinguishes the latter is its apparently divine inspiration,³⁷ although Socrates is careful to emphasise that good rhetoric (as opposed to the

³² For the best example of this theme, see Themistius Or. 26, tr. Penella, 140–163.

³³ Or. 20 [237], tr. Penella, 56, as quoted above.

³⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 229a-b, 242b, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, trans. by Harold North Fowler, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, 418–420, 458–9.

³⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus* 230b-c, tr. Fowler, 422–33.

³⁶ See especially *Phaedrus* 269a-e and 271d-272b; quote 269d (τὴν τοῦ τῷ ὄντι ῥητορικοῦ τε καὶ πιθανοῦ τέχνην), tr. Fowler, 544–7.

³⁷ *Phaedrus* 245a-245c; 257a-b.

techniques which are simply the preliminaries to rhetoric) requires the knowledge of truth, specifically of nature (φύσις) and of different kinds of souls, so as to aid persuasion.³⁸ Famously, a further distinction is made in the closing pages of the dialogue between the written and the spoken word.³⁹ Socrates expresses this contrast in terms of a gardener sowing seeds:

Would a sensible husbandman, who has seeds which he cares for and which he wishes to bear fruit, plant them with serious purpose in the heat of summer in some garden (κήπους) of Adonis, and delight in seeing them appear in beauty in eight days, or would he do that sort of thing, when he did it at all, only in play and for amusement? Would he not, when he was in earnest, follow the rules of husbandry, plant his seeds in fitting ground, and be pleased when those which he had sowed reached their perfection in the eighth month?⁴⁰

The swiftly-growing 'garden of letters' (τοὺς μὲν ἐν γράμμασι κήπους) does not bear *bad* fruit: the product is a better occupation in old age than banquets and gives pleasure and amusement. But the one who 'sows his words with a pen' lacks the *seriousness* of the one who 'plants and sows in a fitting soul intelligent words which are able to help themselves and him who planted them, which are not fruitless, but yield seed from which there spring up in other minds other words capable of continuing the process for ever, and which make their possessor happy, to the farthest possible limit of human happiness'.⁴¹ Here, then, Plato uses both a gentle landscape (which is repeatedly associated with love, nymphs, gods and inspiration) and the analogy of a garden to critique the arts of words. It is more than likely that Themistius is drawing on this tradition as well as the others I have discussed above, in his own articulation of a good, philosophical, rhetoric.

III. Gardens, landscapes and Gregory of Nyssa

What has this all got to do with Gregory's reception of the Song? Firstly, most analyses still lack a sense of what it might have been like *for Gregory* to read it. It is all too easy for us to read the Song of Songs either through the lens of a long western tradition of spiritual interpretation or with modern historical-critical techniques designed to illuminate the Song's original genre and composition. I suggest that when Gregory read the Song its poetic subjects would have been very familiar to him from his own literary traditions: shepherds, spring flowers, gentle birdsong, vines and vineyards, figs and other fruits are all ingredients of the classic mild and pleasant landscape. The

³⁸ *Phaedrus* 271d-272b.

³⁹ *Phaedrus* 275c-276a. While one might assume that the spoken word is rhetoric, here it is more closely associated with dialectic. This move has caused much scholarly debate about Plato's own attitude to rhetoric, but my assumption here is that dialectic is one of the foundations of good rhetoric.

⁴⁰ *Phaedrus* 276b, tr. Fowler, 566-7.

⁴¹ *Phaedrus* 276c-277b, tr. Fowler, 566-71.

Song contains direct references to all the key ingredients of this kind of setting: flocks of sheep and a shepherd (1.7; 2.16), sustenance (milk, wine and honey: 5.1) and a variety of spice-bearing plants (5.1; 6.2; 4.6). The action takes place close to a city (3.2; 5.7) and several houses are mentioned (1.4; 1.1; 2.4; 2.9; 3.4; 5.2-6). This is emphatically not a wilderness. Furthermore, aspects of the bride are described in terms of doves (1.15; 4.1) flowers (2.1-2), apples (2.3), pomegranates (4.3; 6.7), even a flock of goats (!) (4.1; 6.5) or sheep (4.2; 6.6). The lover has eyes like doves, cheeks as bowls of spices, lips as lilies (5.12-13). The role of the garden in particular is emphasised, for not only does it appear to be the place where the couple meet, but it is the 'proper' place for the lover: 'My beloved has gone down to his garden (εἰς κῆπον αὐτοῦ)... to graze among the gardens (ἐν κήποις) and to gather lilies' (6.2; cf 4.16-5.1). Finally and famously the bride is described as an enclosed garden (κῆπος κεκλεισμέμος: 4.12), a fountain in a garden (πηγή: 4.12, 15) and a 'garden/a paradise of pomegranates' (παράδεισος ῥοῶν: 4.13). For modern readers, these images may recall Origen, Gregory, and perhaps Bernard. For Gregory, they were likely to recall Homer, Sappho and Theocritus.

The rest of this paper will set out an explanation of why this matters and what Gregory's reading has to do with rhetoric. Focussing on the *ekphrasis* of a spring landscape in *Cant V*, I will ask why Gregory *dwells* on the description of the landscape and garden, commenting on its physical features and even expanding the description himself. Why, if he thinks that the truth of the Song lies in its spiritual meaning, does he spend so much time writing about gardens?

Before I examine this passage, however, I want briefly to offer some evidence to corroborate my claim that Gregory's writing about gardens referred back to the classical traditions outlined above. An excellent example is Gregory's *Letter 20* to Adelphius, which refers explicitly to Odyssey VII's description of the gardens of King Alcinous.⁴² Like Alcinous' garden, Adelphius' is well-ordered, beautiful and fecund. It may not bear magical fruit through the supernatural intervention of the gods, but it does contain peaches grown through the crafty mixing of different strains.⁴³ Gregory self-consciously draws attention to the way in which the garden is nature tamed by art (τεχνη): ironically, the ordered planting is so artistic it is impossible for the art of words to describe.⁴⁴ Even the fish in the ponds are tame beyond all expectation.⁴⁵ Just as Alcinous' garden heightens our sense of him as 'the rich king of an orderly society', so Gregory's words flatteringly reflect Adelphius'

⁴² 'Then lying around the buildings are the Phaeacian gardens (κῆποι) – but let not the beauties of Vanota be insulted by comparison with those. Homer never saw "the apple with shining fruit" (τὴν μηλέαν τὴν ἀγλαόκαρπον) that we have seen here...': Gregory of Nyssa *Ep.* XX:9-10; ed. & trans. by Pierre Maraval, Paris, 1990, 264,48–51.; trans. by Anna Silvas, Leiden, 2007, 185; cf Odyssey VII 115: μηλέαι ἀγλαόκαρποι: tr. Murray and Henderson, 255.

⁴³ *Ep.* XX 11, tr. Silvas, 185–6.

⁴⁴ *Ep.* XX 12, tr. Silvas, 186.

⁴⁵ *Ep.* XX 15 (SC363 266,82-4), tr. Silvas, 186.

wealth and his good-management of his estate; Gregory is perhaps also implicitly comparing the physical beauty and order to the virtues of Adelphius' inner life.⁴⁶

But we may also note some tension: if 'nature' is 'tyrannized by art' (τυραννηθεῖσα παρὰ τῆς τέχνης ἢ φύσις) is there a somewhat tasteless excess in this garden? This might particularly seem to be the case in the light of a tirade against luxurious gardens in the third of Gregory's *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*. It is true that this attack is set within a spiritual interpretation – 'what need of many gardens (παράδεισων πολλῶν) has he who looks towards the one garden (τὸν ἓνα παράδεισον)? What use have I for a plot (κῆπου) that grows vegetables, the food of the weak in health?'⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Gregory seems also to be denouncing actual luxurious gardens of the kind that he might well have visited or heard of himself. He criticises luxury (ἡ τρυφή) that goes beyond necessity (τῇ χρείᾳ)⁴⁸ and which finds expression in plants that have been cultivated to grow unnaturally: for example, evergreen trees which become a roof, or plants which grow out of season.⁴⁹ Gregory's 'exhibit A' of unnatural extravagance is 'all the types of fruit which are artificially produced (lit. which 'force nature' τὴν φύσιν βιάζεται) by crossing different species with each other, giving an ambiguous impression in appearance and taste, so as to seem to be both kinds when they are a mixture of two different ones'.⁵⁰ Art here is guilty of distorting nature, exceeding plain need, under the influence of 'undisciplined desire' (ἡ ἀπαιδαγώγητος ἐπιθυμία).⁵¹

From these and other passages in Gregory's writings, I think we can draw the following conclusions: first, that he sometimes draws self-consciously on other classic descriptions of gardens in his own writing; secondly, it is likely that he is using a description of a garden in *Letter 20* to heighten our sense of Adelphius' status and character (without in any way suggesting that what he is describing is not 'real'); thirdly, he is able to use the nature-artifice relationship to create a sense of wonder (*Letter 20*) and to condemn the kind of artifice that arises from the unbridled desire for luxury (*EccI III*), and finally, although he does not *explicitly* use these passages as places in which to reflect on the art of writing, he does in *Letter 20* artfully and rather disingenuously contrast the art of the gardener with his own claimed lack of verbal skill – that is, he is *implicitly* using a description of a garden to encourage the reader to think about *how* as well as *what* Gregory is writing.

⁴⁶ Jenkyns, *Virgil's Experience*, 27, as quoted above.

⁴⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *EccI III* (GNO V 331,14-16); *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies : Proceedings of the Seventh International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa* (St. Andrews, 5-10 September 1990), ed. & trans. by Stuart G. Hall, Berlin; New York, 1993, 69, translation slightly adapted.

⁴⁸ *EccI III* (GNO V 331,22), tr. Hall, 69.

⁴⁹ *EccI III* (GNO V 332,4-17), tr. Hall, 70.

⁵⁰ *EccI III* (GNO V 332,14-17), tr. Hall, 70. See also line 18 ἡ τέχνη βιασαμένη τὴν φύσιν ('art distorting nature'), tr. Hall, 70.

⁵¹ *EccI III* (GNO V 333:17-20), tr. Hall, 70.

IV. Homilies on the Song of Songs V (GNO VI: 146-154)

Let us turn to Gregory's fifth *Homily on the Song of Songs* – specifically to his exegesis of Song 2: 10-13 (LXX):

⁸The voice of my kinsman:
Behold, he comes leaping over the mountains,
bounding over the hills....
¹⁰My kinsman answers and says to me,
Rise up, come, my close one, my fair one, my dove.
¹¹For behold, the winter is past,
the rain is gone; it has departed.
¹²The flowers are seen on the earth;
the time for cutting has come,
the voice of the dove is heard in our land.
¹³The fig tree has put forth its early fruit,
the vines blossom, they give off fragrance.⁵²

As Gregory notes, the words of the male lover are the bride's account of what the groom said: a speech within a speech.⁵³ The pages which will be the focus of my argument have the following structure:

- A. Gregory begins book V by describing the effect of the Song on himself, summarising his exegesis so far (GNO VI 137,4 – 140,7; tr. Norris, 151-3).
- B. He offers a spiritual interpretation of the words 'Behold he is coming, leaping over the mountains, etc.' (Song 2,8-9; GNO VI 140,7 – 145,13; tr. Norris, 153-9): The 'coming' of the lover refers to the incarnation; his speaking through the lattices points to the Word's speaking to the church through the prophets and the law.
- C. Gregory quotes Song 2,11-13, then expands on these words himself (GNO VI 145,14 – 147,5; tr. Norris, 159).
- D. He next explains the meaning of Song 2,11-13 through allegorical interpretation: the winter signifies the time when 'humanity was frozen stiff by idolatry'. The spring denotes humanity's salvation through the Spirit and the Word.⁵⁴ (GNO VI 147,5 – 148,20).

Why does Gregory expand on the bride's words (section C)? Why not just give an allegorical interpretation of Song 2,8-13 (sections B and D)? My suggestion is that Gregory is reading the Song as he might read classical Greek literature. Specifically, Gregory assumes that, through being composed in a particular style, the words of the Song express **mood** and **character**. Furthermore, he also has something quite specific to say about **the kind of speech** used in this particular biblical text.

⁵² As translated by Norris, 149.

⁵³ *Cant V* (GNO VI 140,7) tr. Norris, 153.

⁵⁴ *Cant V* (GNO VI 147,5 – 148,6) tr. Norris, 159–161.

In all of this, I suggest, there is a blurring between the plain meaning of the poem and Gregory's theological interpretation: Gregory constantly slides between references to the bride (ἡ νύμφη) and the soul (ἡ ψυχὴ). Quite often, he uses no noun at all and simply relies on feminine participles of the verb, exploiting the ambivalence of the fact that the Greek words for bride and soul are both feminine.⁵⁵ As we shall see, there is a similar blurring of the way he refers to the word (ὁ λόγος). In the opening pages of *Cant V*, then, we have a very good example of a method of interpretation which eludes the common distinction between literal or allegorical interpretation. But this is *not* to say the literal meaning disappears. In fact, Gregory's expansion of the pastoral scene described in the text never ceases to be a description of a landscape which is real within the dramatic narrative of the poem – but it is also a description which carries with it a broader cultural significance or meaning which would have been appreciated by its audience. Consequently, in sections A and C, Gregory is not seeking to decode the text through an allegorical reading which will replace or subsume one (literal) meaning with a replacement (spiritual) meaning.

With regard to **mood**, in section A Gregory emphasises the emotions which the text provokes in him: 'this reading of the philosophy of the Song of Songs' causes him both 'desire' (ἡ ἐπιθυμία) and 'grief' (ἡ λύπη).⁵⁶ The word 'philosophy' might be thought to suggest a spiritual meaning; in fact, Gregory next summarises the main lines of the *narrative* of the Song: 'she recognized the sweet apple tree... she made herself a lover of its shade... she entered the treasure houses of gladness... she is sustained by perfumes...'⁵⁷ The Song says that she can hear her beloved's voice, not see him, thus teaching that she has not truly 'seized her goal'.⁵⁸ Later on, he writes that these are the things which, when understood in their 'obvious sense', (κατὰ τὴν πρόχειρον ἔννοιαν) cause him 'grief' (λύπην).⁵⁹ Only with regard to Song 2,6 does he summarise his own spiritual interpretation: 'When in her heart she has taken the arrow of love, she herself, in the hands of the archer becomes an arrow directed at the target of Truth by the hands of "the Strong One"'.⁶⁰ In these opening pages of *Cant V*, then, Gregory implies that the Song not only evokes the sweetness of a woman's experience of love, conveying her mood of mixed desire, joy and grief, but also creates a similarly paradoxical mood in himself.⁶¹ As Sappho awaited Aphrodite and – we may surmise –

⁵⁵ See for example, *Cant V* (GNO VI 137-8) tr. Norris, 151. An idiomatic English translation demands that one supplies a subject (Norris chooses 'soul'), but Gregory himself nowhere in these lines names the subject as either 'soul' or 'bride'.

⁵⁶ *Cant V* (GNO VI 137, 4-6; 140,2) tr. Norris, 151-2.

⁵⁷ *Cant V* (GNO VI 137, 12 – 138,3), tr. Norris, 151.

⁵⁸ *Cant V* (GNO VI 138,15-16), tr. Norris, 15-16.

⁵⁹ *Cant V* (GNO VI 140,2-4), tr. Norris, 153.

⁶⁰ *Cant V* (GNO VI 138, 3-6), tr. Norris, 151.

⁶¹ Words for 'sweetness', joy/blessedness and love/desire dominate these lines: τὸ γλυκὺ μῆλον, τῷ καρπῷ καταγλυκανθεῖσα; ἐμακάριζον, τῆς εὐφροσύνης, εὐφραίνεται, τῆς μακαριότητος; ἐπιθυμητὴν, ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ, τῆς ἀγάπης τὸ βέλος. *Cant V* (GNO VI 137,12 – 138,6), tr. Norris, 151.

sought to stimulate a similar state of expectation in her reader, so Gregory the literary exegete assumes that a well-written poem not only describes emotion but provokes it in the reader. His empathetic emotion is *transformed* by the understanding that the lover represents the divine Word – but the emotion is *stimulated* by the *narrative* of the poem as much as by its spiritual interpretation.

Read through the lens of the classical Greek tradition, the reported speech in Song 2,11-13 suggests a fittingness between the lover's arrival and the season, for the passage contains many of the features of pleasant landscape that we noted above: gentle pastures with flowers, fruit and softly singing birds. To the classical Greek mind this is the appropriate context for a romantic encounter. But, as in Sappho's fragment 2, the erotic spills over into the religious: Gregory's *ekphrasis* of the landscape in section C makes it clear that it is not merely *appropriate* for the lover to be in that pleasant landscape, but that the lover's arrival *makes* the landscape pleasant because he is divine – he is 'the maker of Springtime' (ὁ πλάστης τοῦ ἔαρος).⁶² It is as if Gregory had read the references to the groom in the poem 'leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills' (v.8) in the light of Homeric images of gods transforming the landscapes they enter. In sum, Jenkyns' words about Sappho could nearly be applied to the woman's words in the Song: for here we find

the combination of personal emotion or experience with the description or evocation of the individual character of a scene. This poem conveys both a mood and a picture, both subjectivity and objectivity, as [the bride] conveys how she feels, being in a particular place at a particular time.⁶³

Furthermore, using Webb's understanding of *ekphrasis* we can see that, through his *ekphrasis* of the landscape (which is an expansion of the woman's words in the Song), Gregory heightens readers' sense of the woman's joyful expectation with the aim that they will imaginatively participate in it. He heightens and intends to provoke in others mood of combined desire and religious awe.

Gregory's words also delineate the **character** of the groom. His *ekphrasis* heightens the sense of the beauty of spring, thus glorifying 'the maker of Springtime' still further: the meadows are 'teeming and glorious with blossoms', he writes, and the flowers 'are at their best and ready to be cut'.⁶⁴ The words of the Song remind the audience that the garden is *his* garden (e.g. Song 5,1; 6,2). Thus, the beauty and fruitfulness of the garden reflect back on the divine Word, symbolically denoting him as the fertile and beautiful source of all creation, which is *his*. It is fair to conclude, then, that Gregory reads the Song with an understanding that in a literary text, characters are placed in a landscape which is fitting to their character. Nevertheless, in the narrative of the Song, the

⁶² Cant V (GNO VI 146,5) tr. Norris, 159.

⁶³ Jenkyns, *Virgil's Experience*, 34.

⁶⁴ Cant V (GNO VI 146, 8-9) tr. Norris, 159.

landscape is real; this is a different literary technique from comparing the beloved to a garden (e.g. Song 4.12-16).

Thirdly, I suggest that Gregory's *ekphrasis* says something not just about the creative power of the Word in nature, but about **the nature of discourse** – specifically, divine discourse. To understand this we need to take a closer look at precisely *how* Gregory expands the description of spring in *Cant V* (GNO VI 146,4 – 147,5).⁶⁵ Gregory's emphatic repetition of λέγει and the use of ὑπογράφει and its cognates at the beginning and end of the passage, imply that he is reading Song 2,11-13 as a speech with certain intentional features. Gregory also comments on the style of the speech: at the beginning, he says it is done elegantly (γλαφυρῶς: 146,4); at the end he sums up its contents as being 'these elegant things' (τῶν γλαφυρῶν τούτων: 147,2). We will shortly return to this particular terminology. Furthermore, Gregory implicitly draws attention to the fact that the description of spring appeals to all the senses, for it evokes the sight of 'the meadows teeming and glorious with blossoms' (146,8-9); the sound of the birds (146,12-14) and the fragrance of flowers (146,17-18). The description even alludes to anticipated taste of the ripening fig and vine (146,14-16) and imagines the touch of those picking flowers and plaiting them into wreathes (146,9-11). Finally, Gregory draws on the ambiguity of ὁ λόγος in a way which is impossible to convey in English: not only does it mean the divine Word and the word of the Biblical text, but it could also be taken to mean 'a speech'. For example, Gregory writes that 'the Logos embellishes (ἡδύνει) the season with the songs of the birds in the groves' (146,12-13). For a Greek audience Gregory is saying both '*the divine Word* embellishes (ἡδύνει) the season with the songs of the birds in the groves' (creation) and '*the word of Scripture* embellishes the season...' (a comment about the richness of Scripture's imagery). Furthermore, the phrase could also mean '*this speech* embellishes the season...' (a literary-critical comment, remarking on the quality of language as such, not on its quality as Scripture, and more focussed on the dramatic performance of the speech in the text of the Song). As he gives his own literary-critical appreciation, Gregory expands on the passage with elaborate phrasing and beautiful images in order to press home the point: Song 2,11-13 is an artful speech – an *ekphrasis* – and so is Gregory's recapitulation of it.

Why does Gregory want to emphasise this so pointedly? I think there are two reasons, one explicit and one implicit. Gregory's explicit reason for stressing the artfulness of Song 2,11-13 is expressed most clearly by the conclusion to his own *ekphrasis*:

The Word (ὁ λόγος) thus speaks with elegance in its account (ἀβρύνεται τῇ ὑπογραφῇ) of springtime's beauty, both casting out gloom and dwelling fondly upon accounts of things that afford more pleasure (τοῖς γλυκυτέροις διηγήμασιν). It is

⁶⁵ tr. Norris, 159.

best, though, I think, that our understanding not come to rest in the account of these sweet things (τῇ τῶν γλαφυρῶν τούτων ὑπογραφῇ) but rather journey by their help toward the mysteries that these oracles reveal, so that the treasure of the ideas hidden in the words may be brought to light.⁶⁶

This passage elegantly expresses a familiar idea: the use sweet words about beautiful things as a pedagogical device in order to attract the soul to a better message.⁶⁷ It also echoes Themistius' idea that the best speech does not aim merely at beauty, pleasure or charm.⁶⁸

Gregory's further and implicit reason for his emphasis on this speech is to be found in his use of certain terms like γλαφυρῶς / τῶν γλαφυρῶν, which have a semi-technical literary or rhetorical meaning. The adjective γλαφυρός comes from the verb γλάφω to scrape or hollow out and was the standard Homeric epithet for a ship. When applied to things made by the hand, γλαφυρός came to mean polished, smooth, neat or delicate and when applied to works of the mind it was used to mean subtle, exact, skilful or refined. In other words, it was a word used to convey a high degree of craftsmanship – something which the English word 'elegant' does not quite capture.⁶⁹ Eventually, the term γλαφυρός was applied in a specifically literary context to describe a polished and refined style. For example, the treatise *On Style* (commonly attributed to an otherwise unknown 'Demetrius' and dating probably from the second century BCE) argues there are four literary styles (χαρακτῆρες).⁷⁰ The grand style (μεγαλοπρεπής) is complex and weighty; the plain (ἰσχνός) is simple and light. There are two intermediate styles: the forceful (δεινός) which is weighty, but quite simple and the elegant or refined style (γλαφυρός), which is light, but quite complex. The γλαφυρός style is 'witty and cheerful' (χαριεντισμός καὶ λόγος ἱλαρός).⁷¹ It sometimes tends in the direction of outright comedy (which expresses wit in plain words). At other times, in the hands of lyric poets, it is more dignified and is characterised above all by 'charm' (χάρις) – a word to which Demetrius frequently returns.⁷² Whereas the comic γλαφυρός style aims to 'make us laugh', the writer of the lyric γλαφυρός style⁷³ 'aims to give pleasure' (εὐφραίνειν).⁷⁴ Demetrius regards lyric poetry as a sophisticated type of γλαφυρός style and analyses in some detail which kinds of composition and

⁶⁶ Cant V (GNO VI 146,13 - 147,5) tr. Norris, 159.

⁶⁷ E.g. Basil, *De legendis gentilium libris* (*On reading pagan literature*, otherwise known as *To young men*), 4; Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* I 931-50; IV 8-25.

⁶⁸ Themistius, Or. 20, tr. Penella, 56–7, cited above page 000.

⁶⁹ *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*
<http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=23028&context=lsj&action=from-search> [accessed 12.2.2015].

⁷⁰ For a discussion of authorship and date see Doreen Innes' introduction to her translation in: *Aristotle, Poetics; Longinus, On the Sublime; Demetrius, On Style*, trans. by Stephen Halliwell et al., Cambridge, Mass., 1995, 313–15; 320–1.

⁷¹ Demetrius, *On Style*, tr. Innes, 429 (§128).

⁷² Demetrius, *On Style*, tr. Innes, 429 (§128).

⁷³ whom Demetrius designates as ὁ εὐχάριστος: *On Style*, tr. Innes, 450 (§168).

⁷⁴ *On Style*, tr. Innes, 453 (§168).

diction lend themselves to it.⁷⁵ He also delineates this style's appropriate subject matter: 'gardens of the nymphs, marriage songs, loves or the poetry of Sappho generally' (νυμφαῖοι κῆποι, ὑμέναιοι, ἔρωτες, ὅλη ἡ Σαπφοῦς ποίησις).⁷⁶ Indeed, Demetrius returns repeatedly to Sappho as his archetypal poet of charm, praising her because, 'in words which are themselves beautiful (καλλιεπής) and attractive (ἡδεῖα), she sings of beauty or love or spring or the halcyon'.⁷⁷

Another example is the teacher of rhetoric and champion of Attic style, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a first century BCE contemporary of Caesar Augustus. In his work praising Demosthenes, Dionysius sets out a broad typology of ways of achieving a harmonious arrangement of words. Some writers seek a 'firm, grave, austere style of composition with its old-fashioned dignity and avoidance of frills'.⁷⁸ Others seek 'the polished (γλαφυράν), articulate, spectacular style, full of ornament and delicate touches, the style with which festival audiences and cosmopolitan crowds are lulled into silence'.⁷⁹ Finally, a third group mix all that is best of the other styles.⁸⁰ Although Dionysius ostensibly regards all three approaches as ways of achieving verbal harmony, nevertheless he seems inclined to favour the intermediate mixed style. For an Atticist like Dionysius, then, a style characterised as γλαφυρός was at one pole of a range of Greek styles, whereas for Demetrius it was more in the middle. Both critics are agreed, however, that a γλαφυρός style is poetic and attractive and not suited to serious disputation or the law courts. This is further indicated by Dionysius' description of the rhetor Isocrates: although his style is 'pure' (καθαρά) and possesses 'lucidity and vividness' (τό σαφές, τό ἐναργές), Dionysius thinks that the composition of his sentences is neither natural nor simple; rather than being suited for the law-courts, it creates 'an effect of ceremonious and ornate dignity' (εἰς σεμνότητα ποιητικὴν καὶ ποικίλην).⁸¹ Dionysius concludes: 'For this orator seeks beauty of expression (τὴν εὐέπειαν) by every means, and aims at polish rather than simplicity (τοῦ γλαφυρῶς λέγειν... ἢ τοῦ ἀφελῶς)'.⁸²

Theories of style in late antiquity were complex and are difficult to generalise: Christoph Klock's comment that this realm of language was 'technical but imprecise' is very apposite.⁸³ However, my research suggests that there was a fairly constant use of the words γλαφυρός in Greek (and *elegans* and *politus* in Latin) to denote a style associated with lyric verse, with some kinds of

⁷⁵ *On Style*, tr. Innes, 433–45 (§137–55); 455–61 (§173–85).

⁷⁶ *On Style*, tr. Innes, 431 (§132); 449 (§163).

⁷⁷ Adapting Innes' word-order: *On Style*, tr. Innes, 451 (§166).

⁷⁸ *Demosthenes*, 36, tr. Usher, I 378–9.

⁷⁹ τὴν γλαφυράν καὶ λιγυράν καὶ θεατρικὴν καὶ πολὺ τὸ κομψὸν καὶ μάλα ἐπιφαίνουσιν: *Demosthenes*, 36, tr. Usher, I 378–9.

⁸⁰ *Demosthenes*, 36, tr. Usher, I 378–9.

⁸¹ *Isocrates*, 2, tr. Usher, I 106–9.

⁸² *Isocrates*, 2, tr. Usher, I 108–9.

⁸³ 'technisch aber unpräziser': Christoph Klock, *Untersuchungen zu Stil und Rhythmus bei Gregor von Nyssa: ein Beitrag zum Rhetorikverständnis der griechischen Väter*, Frankfurt am Main, 1987, 15.

comedy, with Isocratean rhetoric and – importantly for Gregory – with the philosophy of Plato. Furthermore, a γλαφυρός style was often associated with terms such as χάρις, ἱλαρός, καλλιεπής, κάλλος, ἡδύς, χάρις, γλυκύς, εὐφραίνειν. Thus Gregory not only emphatically bookends his *ekphrasis* with the use of γλαφυρός (and its cognates) but reinforces this terminology with other terms appropriate to the γλαφυρός style: for example, τὴν χάριν, ἡδύνει, ἀβρύνεται, τοῖς γλυκυτέροις, εὐφραίνω. In speeches a γλαφυρός style was associated especially with encomium (Gregory uses words from the roots ἐγκωμι- and ἐπαιν- numerous times in his *Homilies on the Song*).⁸⁴ Its ability to charm and delight was appropriate both when the subject-matter was love and when it was philosophy.

V. Conclusions

What conclusions do I draw from my wander through the landscape of Gregory's fifth Homily on the Song? With his use of a particular vocabulary, Gregory of Nyssa is telling his audience that Song 2,11-13 is itself an *ekphrasis* of spring, written in an elegant (γλαφυρός) style which is suited to its subjects (gardens, a bride, a marriage song and love), to pastoral lyric and to non-forensic rhetoric, in addition to characterising Plato's works. Gregory picks up on this style in his own *ekphrasis*. This, together with his own writing about landscape elsewhere, is my justification for reading Gregory's *ekphrasis* in light of the Greek literary tradition.

Following Ruth Webb's analysis of the technique, I suggest that Gregory inherited from his rhetorical training an understanding that the purpose of *ekphrasis* was to stimulate the audience's imaginative and emotional participation in the speaker's words. This is how he both read the Song and interpreted it for others. As a preacher, his aim was to provoke his listeners' 'active engagement' with the text of the Song.⁸⁵ By focussing on this particular passage I have shown that he did this, not only through allegorical exegesis aimed at revealing a deeper spiritual meaning, but also through the technique of *ekphrasis*. This means that the passage we have studied here and others like are not just decorative asides – playful breaths of fresh air in between passages of demanding spiritual exegesis – but are absolutely integral to Gregory's exposition of the Song.

The survey of landscape literature helped to fill out *what kind* of emotional engagement might be anticipated from a text in which a character describing a god's imminent arrival in a pleasant place: that is, participation in the character's anxious hope, anticipated joy and awe. Because of their shared literary inheritance, Gregory does not have to spell these emotions out for

⁸⁴ For example, for ἐγκωμι- see GNO VI 80,4; 80,16-17; 105,8; 187,10; 215,7; 216,17; 219,20; 221,8; 223, 12; 223,18; 224,12; 225,17; 232,12; 242,16; 271,8; 272,9; 279,16; 289,15; 289,17; 406,24; 410,18; 413,10; 415,14; 431,2; 437,9; 445,6; 450,15; 453,7. At 242,6 Gregory explicitly says that it is the Word who presents the praises.

⁸⁵ Borrowing the phrase from Webb, *Ekphrasis*, 193.

his audience, but he can stimulate the audience's participation in the bride's feelings by heightening the effect of the Song with his own *ekphrasis* describing the transformation of a landscape by 'the maker of Springtime'. He prepares the audience for their emotional participation by prefacing this *ekphrasis* with his account of how the Song has already made him feel desire and grief.

However, our analysis of landscapes in literature broadens our understanding of Gregory's *ekphrasis* still further. Using Richard Jenkyns' work, I suggested that the *ekphrasis* emphasises the 'fit' between the lover/the Word and the landscape: its beauty and order reflect the beauty and ordering power of its creator, thus heightening the woman's/the audience's awe still more. Crucially, in order to have this effect, the text must really be about a landscape (albeit a fictional one): the landscape is not a symbol of something completely other – rather than landscape of the narrative expands as it points outwards to the 'landscape' of the cosmos. The material denotes the material here – not a spiritual 'other'.

Finally, I suggested that there was a literary convention that words about landscape were a good context in which to ponder the nature of verbal composition itself. This prepares Gregory's readers to ask whether Gregory himself is offering such reflections. I suggest that Gregory is indeed contemplating words in this passage, but that he is also, for obvious reasons, contemplating the effect and the nature of the divine Word. Verna Harrison and Sarah Coakley have written persuasively about the *gender* fluidities in Gregory's exegesis of the Song.⁸⁶ Following my observations above about Gregory's use of the word *logos* in this passage, I suggest that here one finds him playing with *authorial* fluidity. Throughout the text, the male lover of the Song symbolises the divine Word; thus the *ekphrasis* of Song 2,11-13 is spoken by the divine Word. It is clear from the context that Gregory is thinking of the divine Word both in terms of the Word which inspired the Old Testament (including, presumably the Song) and the incarnate Word, although he thinks that the 'voice' of the Word is apparent in the former, while the Word truly arrived in the incarnation.⁸⁷ But *logos* also indicates the lover's/the divine Word *speech* – his *ekphrasis* of spring. As Gregory reminds his reader, this speech is relayed to the audience of the Song through the woman's words; it is then recapitulated by Gregory's own *ekphrasis*. Thus, *logos* is both a person and his words; the words are the words of God passed on to Gregory's audience through the authorship of the woman in the Song and Gregory himself. The idea that the encounter with the divine in the Song results in the believer

⁸⁶ Verna E. F. Harrison, 'Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology', *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, 41/2 (1990), 441–71; 'A Gender Reversal in Gregory of Nyssa's First Homily on the Song of Songs.', in *Studia Patristica Vol 27* (Louvain, 1993), 34–38; 'Gender, Generation, and Virginité in Cappadocian Theology', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, 47/1 (1996), 38–68; Sarah Coakley, 'Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa: Introduction--Gender, Trinitarian Analogies, and the Pedagogy of The Song', *Modern Theology*, 18/4 (2002), 431–43; *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'on the Trinity'*, 2013.

⁸⁷ *Cant V* (GNO VI 142,9-14), tr. Norris, 155. 144,19 – 145,13 tr. Norris, 157–9.

speaking God's words has been identified in Gregory's allegorical exegesis.⁸⁸ I suggest this passage conveys the same point, admittedly with an understanding that the lover is the Word, but *without* any allegorical interpretation of the character of the woman at this point. Gregory the exegete is simply expanding on the Song's words in order to convey the effect of the narrative *as* a poetic narrative, not in its spiritual application.

Having established this authorial fluidity, one can turn to the quality of the speech shared by these authors/speakers. As I have shown above, Gregory uses a specific vocabulary to denote it clearly as γλαφυρός – that is, elegant, sophisticated, delightfully persuasive speech. Gregory was working in an era when the crude opposition between 'simple, plain and truthful' Christian discourse and 'sophisticated, but errant' pagan discourse had softened somewhat.⁸⁹ However, it is still striking, I think, that he ascribes the γλαφυρός style to God. Rather than simply asserting that humans must fit their language to their audience, Gregory claims not only that God fits his language to human particularity but that the power of language to seduce can, with the right author, be a good thing. In this Gregory affirms the *theological* value of this γλαφυρός style. Consequently, although he may have derided Eunomius' bombast, Gregory was not thereby asserting that a Christian should maintain a purer and thus plainer style. Here he asserts the value – and the essential seriousness – of a style that has often been regarded by modern scholars as at best playful and at worst trivial or decadent.⁹⁰ If the Word speaks elegantly, and thereby draws souls to him, then so too may the Christian preacher.

I suspect that one reason modern readers have regarded the γλαφυρός style as decadent is its firm association with material (I dare to say, feminine) subjects – with shepherds, spring flowers, gentle birdsong, vines and vineyards, figs and other fruits, not to mention desiring bodies – rather than the immaterial abstractions of philosophy. Of course, I am not suggesting here that Gregory's exegesis of the Song never focusses on the immaterial and the transcendent; however, I *am* suggesting that there are places where materiality and the divine coincide more emphatically than one might think. Analysis of *Cant V* suggests that for Gregory, the Word who says, 'Behold the winter is past' is not merely the inspirer of Scripture, but also the *incarnate* Christ who entered the world at a particular place and time. Indeed, the setting of the garden recalls not only the classical gardens

⁸⁸ Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence*, Oxford; New York, 2004, chap. 6.

⁸⁹ Wolfram Kinzig, 'The Greek Christian Writers', in *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period, 330 B.C.-A.D. 400*, ed. by Stanley E Porter, Leiden; New York, 1997, 634–41.

⁹⁰ Whereas I am assuming here an ancient theory of (at least) three styles, there is a long tradition of scholarship, following from the seminal work of Eduard Norden, that divides Greek prose into serious, plain, philosophical and decadent, fancy, poetic styles, the γλαφυρός style being very firmly in the latter category. I believe this judgment to rest on a fundamentally flawed reading back of the Atticist/Asianist rhetorical binary of the 1st century BCE on to earlier Greek literature. See Eduard Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa vom VI. Jahrhundert v. Chr. bis in die Zeit der Renaissance* (Leipzig, 1898).

into which anthropomorphic gods enter, but also the garden of Eden (hence the second Adam) and the garden in which the risen Christ encounters Mary Magdalen.⁹¹ The Song is therefore not just about the timeless encounter of the Word with a human soul, but as Gregory's comments on the divine economy make clear,⁹² it is also about the Word entering his 'garden' of creation to restore it and its residents to their original order, beauty and fertility. Just as the materiality of the world is redeemable along with human souls (although neither are yet perfect), so Gregory seems to indicate that the *forms* of human speech might be redeemable along with the ideas they attempt to express (although neither will ever comprehend the divine). Thus, I conclude we need to pay attention to the body of what Gregory says – its form, its style, its rhetoric – as well as its spiritual meaning. For Gregory, the Song is about the human soul meeting the divine; but it is also, sometimes, about incarnation, creation and the joy of texts.

⁹¹ Mary Magdalen encountered the risen Christ in a κήπος (John 19,41); she assumes Christ to be the keeper of the garden (κηπουρός: John 20,15). My thanks to the participants in the discussion of my paper in Rome for drawing my attention to these points.

⁹² *Cant V* (GNO VI 140,9-12), tr. Norris, 153.